

**The School Administrator** *April 2010 Number 4, Vol. 67|* Virtual Classes, Real Policy| 13

*Spotlight*

**Startup Advice for Online Education**

So what should a school district hoping to jump into online education do next?  
  
First, realize you don’t have to go it alone. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel when so many states and school districts already have mapped out strategies. But it’s a fluid endeavor — it’s different for every district, and there’s not just one way to go about it.   
  
You have to figure out what makes sense for your school district, says Matthew Wicks, who runs a Chicago-area consulting firm specializing in helping schools and districts tap into the potential of online learning.  
  
Wicks knows a little bit about the whole process. He was a co-founder of the Illinois Virtual High School. He offers these tips for those just starting down the path toward online learning.  
  
**•  Determine your purpose.** Is it primarily for students’ credit recovery or advanced classes? Will the school focus on electives or gear itself toward students at risk of dropping out?  
  
The Omaha Public Schools in Nebraska launched its online program four years ago, primarily as a way for at-risk students to retake classes they’d failed. The 48,000-student district created its own online courses, which are a blend of independent study and a weekly lab and assessment with an instructor.  
  
The program maintained that focus for almost two years, says Mary Schlegelmilch, the district’s eLearning supervisor, before turning its sights on credit rescue.  
  
Now, teachers are trained to catch students before they fail, identifying those who might benefit from the online learning environment in addition to the traditional classroom, Schlegelmilch says.  
  
Other school districts choose to offer online programs as a means of enrichment for students, much like the Minnesota Virtual Academy in Houston, Minn. There, students can take Chinese or Advanced Placement classes.  
  
“Understanding why you’re creating the online school is really, really important,” Wicks says. “It drives other discussions.”  
  
**•  Understand your stakeholders.** This is a biggie, Wicks says, and when done correctly, can set a new program on the path to success. The thoughts and needs of the staff, parents and students should come into play in any serious discussion, he says.  
  
“The best online programs I’ve seen do a great job of bringing in all those participants from the very beginning so they have ownership,” Wicks says.  
  
Wicks points to the Aldine Independent School District, a Texas district of 59,000 students, as an example of one that has worked to ensure the needs and concerns of different groups within the district have been assuaged.  
  
When the Aldine district began its online credit-recovery program a decade ago, many teachers were worried the coursework wouldn’t be up to par and that computer-based instruction would ultimately hurt district teachers, according to information from the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) publication “Promising Practices in Online Learning.”   
  
The Aldine district’s online learning program moved quickly to allay those fears, recruiting top students to tutor those in the online program and requiring students to take courses online to pass a final exam to gain course credit. And the district hired master teachers to develop the curriculum.  
  
**•  Maintain student support.** Of course, the most important factor in offering any online program is students, Wicks says. They’re the reason the need for such programs exists, and their needs have to remain at the forefront.  
  
That’s why it’s imperative that districts from the start plan how to systematize student support, Wicks says. How detailed that support needs to be depends on what sort of program a district offers.   
  
A full-time virtual school might need to intentionally build in more face-to-face time with a teacher than a supplemental model. The teacher-student relationship should remain the focus, Wicks says. Otherwise, the online course could end up resembling an independent study class.   
  
While iNACOL remains the largest national organization advocating for online learning, several others can offer help to districts looking to launch virtual programs. These include the [Southern Regional Education Board](http://www.sreb.org/)  the [Virtual School Clearinghouse](http://www.vsclearinghouse.com/)  and numerous proprietary vendors.  
  
Later this year, iNACOL and Wicks hope to have available a website geared toward guiding school districts through the thinking and steps necessary to start online programs of their own. The site will stand alone but will be linked to [iNACOL’s site](http://www.inacol.org/).  
  
**— Kate Beem**